

# Reflections on Two NYC Art Exhibitions

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In Goethe's view, artists work in a special sphere, in which they raise nature closer to divinity and, in doing so, invest their creations with the divine part of their own beings. Because works of art bear the imprint of the artist's higher self, we can experience art as the living expression of a living personality, whether or not the artist is still alive. Because they also reflect the characteristics of the specific time and place where the artist lived, they embody, not only the artist's own personality, but the spirit of a people and time. Forgers cannot imitate this; and, if a work is assigned to the wrong artist or an incorrect phase of the artist's career, something appears profoundly wrong. On the other hand, one can leave a successful exhibition with a lively awareness of an artist's inner biography or the spirit of a people as it evolves through time.

Centenaries and other anniversaries, as stimuli for funding and attendance, especially inspire the organizers of art exhibitions, but, apart from the irresistible urge to celebrate the change in the calendar, 1999 was a typical year for exhibitions in New York. Artists, both living and dead, were surveyed. Collections, both public and private, were displayed. Local collecting was publicized. Ancient and modern civilizations were spread before us. Two examples, I believe, can show us what Goethe would have enjoyed most or least this year, if he were able to follow us around New York museums. After all, the 250th anniversary of his own birth was celebrated in 1999.

At *New York Collects*, the fine exhibition of modern drawings held at the Morgan Library last summer, I was struck by three sheets by Henri Matisse. All three depicted women in interiors, but although all were typical of Matisse's familiar styles, each was quite distinctive. One was a voluptuous nude body drawn with long, continuous lines of a sharp pen in black ink. In another, a drawing of a group of women, broad lines of charcoal emphasized the structure of each figure and the group as a whole. The third drawing lacked the sensuality of the first woman and the artist's febrile response to her; neither did it have the inward structural probing of the second drawing. Instead, the reclining nude was drawn with straight, disconnected charcoal strokes. Through visible underdrawing and pentimenti, he revealed the inner geometry of the recumbent body, its movement, and its formative life force.

If one were to encounter these three drawings without signatures or previous knowledge, it might not

be so obvious that they were made by the same artist within a few years of one another. The labels tell us, however, that Matisse produced all three between 1935 and 1938.

The pleasant encounter with Matisse's three drawings was nothing more nor less than an intimate, meditative meeting between artist and viewer. Historical exhibitions offer another sort of opportunity: they can enhance the enjoyment and understanding of the side of art that reflects a particular nationality as it develops through time. Unfortunately, today's "new" art history and popularized exhibitions sometimes obscure, rather than elucidate, the essentials of art. A much-publicized exhibition at the Whitney – *The American Century: Art and Culture 1900-2000, Part I, 1900-1950* – is a typical example. It adopts a basically historical agenda, claiming to go about it in a "groundbreaking" way. Its size declares its characteristically American ambition. Over five hundred works, displayed chronologically, are grouped by

period: America in the Age of Confidence, Jazz Age America, etc. Within this structure, the exhibition explores familiar themes of American history, culture, and art; for example: Genteel America, Nostalgia and Spirituality, Immigration, Consumer Culture, Industry, Depression America, Abstraction, Streamlined Design, and Postwar Anxiety. Artifacts of popular culture – such as

sheet music, magazine covers, and film clips – are mixed with fine art in many media, ranging from painting, sculpture, and architecture to drawing and photography.

The integrity of these art forms and their interactions with one another are not among the interests of the exhibition, and there is no balance in their treatment. Sculpture and printmaking are the most neglected; painting and photography the best represented. In fact, the emphasis on the latter might easily leave the visitor with the impression that photography is the most compelling art form of all. Painting, on the other hand, is dominated by a few masterpieces – for example, Wood's *American Gothic* and Benton's *Bootleggers* – but these are few among an encyclopedic selection of minor artists (which was fascinating in itself, and would have been truly valuable in a more specialized exhibition) and mediocre examples of major artists, such as Dove and O'Keefe. *The American Century* exhibition is not about quality.

Apart from the written label content, which repeats the clichés about our society familiar from the media and schoolbooks, *The American Century* is held together by a series of images so famous that they are "iconic." With the eminent exception of *American Gothic*, most of these are photographs, shown as original works of art, often in vintage prints, al-

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though their fame relies on reproductions in magazines and books. There is Steichen's *Portrait of J. P. Morgan*, Stieglitz' *Steerage*, and Robert Capa's *D-Day, Omaha Beach*. Alongside these are clips from iconic films, which are the most popular attractions: the assembly line scene in *Modern Times*, *Citizen Kane*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. The significance of this concoction of high art, industrial design, and popular icons is never discussed in any enlightening way in the exhibition, whatever the weighty catalogue may say about the problem.

What is "groundbreaking" about all this? *The American Century* is an exceptionally large educational exhibition that happens to include some important works of art. It also includes parallel offerings in digital media, both within the museum and on the internet. Video screens of all sizes and degrees of discretion are interspersed throughout the exhibition. The on-line version of the exhibition, co-developed by Intel, begins with the sentence: "America becomes the world's largest industrial power."

The medium and much of the message of *The American Century* is the merger of the art exhibition and industry. As in American culture at large, the function and power of art are diluted and marginalized. Works that were originally intended to shock, like Duchamp's urinal or Demuth's and Cadmus' queer sailors, make a depressingly bland impression, reminding us of the extent to which museum professionals have looked to Disneyland for guidance in recent years.

The monstrous size of *The American Century*, its indiscriminate selection, and its random conceptual framework could be seen as a response to the scale and variety of American culture in the second full century of nationhood. The unprecedented expansion of the media of communication and record-keeping during this century have both added to the quantity of history and inflated its apparent magnitude. This mushroom cloud of information will grow faster than the human population in years to come, thanks to the digital technology which plays a star role in this exhibition. Our new ability to create a virtually limitless record (and display) of images and information is perhaps as much to blame as the subject, our myopic perspective on it, or weak curatorial direction for the pervasive confusion in *The American Century*, which mobilizes such vast resources to tell us so little about history, civilization, or art.

However, on second thought, I think Goethe, who liked big things, might have enjoyed it immensely.

## Leaves

DAISY ALDAN

The leaves receive the raindrops  
and they communicate  
in the gentle patter of their meeting.

From below, leaves in light  
become green-gold fish  
and sometimes they hold shadows of birds.

Here the leaf-dendron, primal  
shape of tree, extends  
in reverence, the woven web of green.

Not a throw of the dice  
the radial number, but  
as the spine which splays its fan of nerves,

The Poet reads the script  
and writes it; captures essence  
in the glowing intervals:

becomes alchemist of leaf's  
continuing spiral  
of transubstantiation.



EURHYTHMIST 2 – PHOTO BY LARRY YOUNG